

## Political Approaches to Tackling Islamophobia

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DOI:

[10.3390/socsci6030077](https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci6030077)

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*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Allen, C 2017, 'Political Approaches to Tackling Islamophobia: An 'Insider/Outsider' Analysis of the British Coalition Government's Approach between 2010–15', *Social Sciences*, vol. 6, no. 3, 77, pp. 1-19.  
<https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci6030077>

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## Article

# Political Approaches to Tackling Islamophobia: An ‘Insider/Outsider’ Analysis of the British Coalition Government’s Approach between 2010–15

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Received: 16 June 2017; Accepted: 10 July 2017; Published: 17 July 2017

**Abstract:** Soon after the Conservative-led Coalition government came to power in 2010, Baroness Sayeeda Warsi announced that Islamophobia had passed the ‘dinner-table test’ in contemporary Britain. Resultantly, the need to address Islamophobia was identified as a priority for the Coalition. This article critically analyses how the Coalition sought to achieve this and the extent to which it was successful. Focusing on the period 2010–15, this article initially frames what is meant by Islamophobia, before briefly setting out how it had been responded to by previous British governments. Regarding the Coalition, a threefold approach is adopted that considers the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Islamophobia, the Cross-Government Working Group on Anti-Muslim Hate, and the political discourses used by the Coalition about Muslims and Islam more generally. Concluding that the Coalition failed to meet the high expectations set by Warsi’s speech, this article considers why this might have been so.

**Keywords:** Islamophobia; British politics; Coalition Government; Conservative Party; discrimination; Muslims; minority communities

## 1. Introduction

“It seems to me that Islamophobia has now crossed the threshold - For far too many people, Islamophobia is seen as a legitimate—even commendable—thing. Islamophobia should be seen as totally abhorrent—just like homophobia or Judeophobia—we need political leadership. Government has got to show that it gets it” (Warsi 2011).

Almost a decade and a half after Islamophobia first entered the British political space via the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia’s (CBMI) ground-breaking report, *Islamophobia: a challenge for us all* (Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia 1997), Baroness Sayeeda Warsi’s 2011 speech was a welcome development for those that had been lobbying subsequent British governments for political interventions to address this discriminatory phenomenon. Popularly referred to as her ‘dinner-table test’ speech, Warsi’s pronouncements were seen as a watershed moment, affording Islamophobia the political recognition it had been missing for too long (Allen 2010b, 2013c). As co-chair of the Conservative Party at the time, Warsi’s speech was unquestionably catalytic, prompting the establishment of the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Islamophobia, followed by the Cross-Government Working Group on Anti-Muslim Hate (Working Group) shortly after. So too did it catalyse high expectations, with many believing that the Conservative-led Coalition Government was, as Warsi put it, going to be the first to ‘get it’ in addressing Islamophobia in Britain.

Two drivers are put forward as to why it was necessary for the Coalition to ‘get it’. The first relates to the fact that in the wake of the 7/7 terrorist attacks on the London public transport system in July 2005, there was a sharp increase in the number of street-level hate crimes targeting British Muslims in

everyday settings (Chakraborti and Zempi 2012; Zempi and Chakraborti 2014; Allen 2015). While the prevalence of such hate crimes was extremely difficult to quantify at the time given the lack of any formal monitoring mechanisms being in place (Hargreaves 2014), anecdotal evidence suggests that the problem was significant enough to make politicians believe that an appropriate response was necessary (Allen 2013c). This has been further reinforced by the fact that since 7/7, similar patterns have been evident after almost all terrorist attacks where the perpetrators either self-identify as Muslim, or claim to act in the 'name of Islam'. The second relates to Morey and Yaqin (2011) observations that Muslims are in the contemporary setting routinely conceived as a homogenous 'Other' which presents a very real, ongoing, and at times apocalyptic threat to 'our' values, democracies, identities, and way of life. For Ansari (2012), such discourses have been both overt and covert in the mainstream of Europe's political spaces over the past two decades. In Britain, she argues that this was particularly evident among the discourses of the far-right and how those such as the British National Party (BNP) used these to make inroads into the mainstream. Primarily targeting white, working class audiences in areas where there were high levels of social and economic deprivation, not only did the BNP stress the threat posed by both Muslims and Islam through campaigns titled 'Islam Out of Britain' and 'Islam Referendum Day', but so too did the BNP convey to its target audience how the Muslim 'Other' was believed to be responsible for many of the social ills they were encountering. Consequently, constructions of the Muslim 'Other' became relevant within political discourses in the British setting (Allen 2010a).

This article argues that in spite of the unprecedented political recognition afforded to Islamophobia by the Coalition, little more was offered in terms of addressing the phenomenon than by the preceding New Labour government. Resultantly, this article argues that governmental approaches to tackling Islamophobia in the British political space continue to be ineffectual, thereby rendering policy approaches necessarily meaningless. In doing so, this article critically reflects on the Coalition government's approach to addressing Islamophobia during its term of government between 2010 and 2015. Initially framing what is meant by Islamophobia, this article briefly sets out the approaches to addressing the phenomenon preferred by previous British governments. From here, a threefold approach is adopted. First, a consideration of the establishment, function, and subsequent outputs from the APPG on Islamophobia; second, a similar consideration of the Anti-Muslim Hate Working Group; and thirdly, a brief analysis of the political discourses of the Coalition about Muslims and Islam more generally. In conclusion, this article reflects on the extent to which the Coalition met the expectations prompted by Warsi's speech in seeking to address Islamophobia in contemporary Britain. In doing so, this article contributes new and timely thinking to the relatively embryonic body of scholarly studies relating to the phenomenon of Islamophobia and more importantly, scholarly studies about Islamophobia within the field of politics and policy. This article therefore has both academic and political salience.

## 2. Methodology

The three-stranded methodological approach underpinning this article is unique in the context of the existing literature. The first strand comprises an analysis of existing policy and scholarly resources, and other publicly available sources including those accessible in the media and online spaces. The second strand comprises an analysis of previously unpublished documents and similar resources that were only made available to those engaged in the Coalition's APPG and Working Group. This was possible through the author having participated in both the APPG and Working Group from November 2010 through to October 2014 in an independent 'expert' capacity. It is necessary to stress that this participation was non-partisan and received no remuneration whatsoever. It did however afford a number of unprecedented opportunities to engage with British governmental ministers, members of Parliament, and other appropriate political actors, including both Muslims and non-Muslims that had been co-opted to represent a range of civil society and community organisations and groups. This engagement took the form of face-to-face meetings, workshops, and both formal and

informal conversations, along with electronic communications including emails, online forums, and the sharing of documents. Throughout the process of participation, research notes were kept by the author through which observations, reflections, and thoughts were recorded. These research notes comprise the third strand.

Given the methodological approach preferred, the significance of one's positionality is crucially important, not least because the author was both a participant and participatory within the political mechanisms that provide the primary focus of this article. It is therefore likely that some blurring of the boundaries between insider and outsider perspectives will have taken place. While this particular form of participation fell short of the activist research identified by [Huisman \(2008\)](#), it nonetheless allowed unprecedented access to the political spaces, actors, and mechanisms that indeterminably shaped the way in which Islamophobia was being addressed in the British political setting. Noting that knowledge about these spaces, actors, and mechanisms can be as invisible as they are inaccessible to most, such an embedded participatory approach meant that access to discussions and debates that had the potential for new and unique insights and understandings to be made available. An oft-cited criticism of such an approach is that it jeopardises objectivity ([Spano 2005, 2006](#)). While acknowledged, such criticisms can be countered by questioning the extent to which true objectivity can ever be achieved. Similarly, too, with those who posit criticisms that demand the 'decontamination' of research findings ([Monahan and Fisher 2010](#)). Again, while rightly acknowledging these, such arguments are typically incoherent and without foundation. This article is therefore premised on the basis that the embodied knowledge inherited clearly outweighs any concerns about lack of objectivity ([Sherif 2001; Heidegger 2002](#)).

Lastly, the limitations of political mechanisms and policy interventions seeking to address discriminatory phenomena must be acknowledged. For [Blakemore and Drake \(1996\)](#) and [Daniels and Macdonald \(2005\)](#), this is because political mechanisms and policy interventions typically only seek to curb certain behaviours, rather than change public attitudes. According to [Bhavani et al. \(2005\)](#), irrespective of the mechanisms and interventions in place, such will only ever address the effects and rarely ever the causes. Accordingly, they refer to interventions having an impact at the micro level rather than the macro. Applying this to contemporary manifestations of Islamophobia, it is likely that any political mechanisms or policy interventions will have the greatest impact on curbing the activities of those perpetrating street-level Islamophobic attacks ([Allen 2014](#)), as opposed to what [Allen \(2010b, 2013a\)](#) terms 'Islamophobia thinking': what people commonly 'think' and 'know' about Muslims and Islam. This is because Islamophobia thinking (macro Islamophobia) is—in line with other discriminatory phenomena—extremely complex, given that it has evolved out of centuries of asymmetric power relations ([Allen 2010b; Sheehi 2011](#)).

In terms of addressing discriminatory phenomena in the British political space, [Afridi \(2015\)](#) identifies a range of political mechanisms and policy interventions that have been historically deployed. These variously include: education and training; legal sanctions and enforcement; counselling and mentoring; changing procedures within institutions; increased monitoring; target-setting; and cross-community interaction. [Bhavani et al. \(2005\)](#) suggest two categories within which all can be placed: formal and informal. For them, formal interventions refer to new policies or legislation that are introduced or put in place, whereas informal interventions are more fluid and incorporate projects, initiatives, and targeted activities, as also discourses and narratives. Formal and informal categorisations will be used throughout this article as a means of not only improving understanding, but so too positioning the political mechanisms and policy interventions implemented to address Islamophobia within the broader focus of how other similar discriminatory phenomena have been addressed in Britain historically.

### 3. Context and Findings

#### 3.1. Framing Islamophobia

As noted previously, Islamophobia was first afforded recognition in the British political space following the publication of the CBMI's 1997 report. The first time Islamophobia had been defined, the CBMI simplistically described it as a shorthand way of referring to "the dread or hatred of Islam...and, therefore, to fear or dislike all or most Muslims" ([Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia 1997](#), p. 1). It added that Islamophobia was evident through certain "recurring characteristic(s) of closed views" ([Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia 1997](#), p. 1). It illustrated the 'closed views' as being when Muslims and Islam were presented as being an enemy, as violent, aggressive, unchanging, threatening, separate, or 'Other', among others ([Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia 1997](#)). For [Allen \(2010b\)](#), this was too simplistic because if the 'closed views' were seen to be illustrative of Islamophobia, so any corresponding 'open views'—as set out in the CBMI report as a more balanced and 'rational' approach to presenting Muslims and Islam—had to necessarily be seen to be illustrative of 'Islamophilia'. As he concludes, not only might a blanket Islamophilia be as unwelcome and unhelpful as an Islamophobia equivalent, but so too might the focus on a starkly binary approach have the potential for everything about Muslims, Islam, and Islamophobia to be simplistically seen in terms of black or white, good or bad, and so on. As [Allen \(2010b\)](#) rightly notes, the black or white has the potential to negate the 'grey', where the greatest complexity and most challenging questions relating to discriminatory phenomena typically reside.

[Allen \(2010b\)](#) cites the CBMI's overly-simplistic approach as one of the main reasons why Islamophobia failed to be taken seriously—and subsequently addressed—in the British political space. To explain this, he refers to the 'race relations problematic' ([Hall 1979](#)) and the challenge to convince those with political influence and power of the importance, and subsequent need to address, discriminatory phenomena. As Hall puts it, if they remain unconvinced, then it is likely that the only interventions that will emerge will be phoney and patronising and at the expense of those most likely to encounter the more tangible realities of prejudice, discrimination, bigotry, and hate. As [Hall \(1979\)](#) goes on, this detrimentally impacts those lobbying for interventions to address discriminatory phenomena, in that they typically resort to naïve arguments about just 'how bad' discriminatory phenomena are thereby overlooking the far more harsher realities. Some point to the CBMI in this respect, highlighting how it not only failed to effectively communicate the reality and seriousness of Islamophobia, but so too provide appropriate supporting evidence ([Halliday 2002](#)).

Scholarly studies have now shifted away from such overly-simplistic approaches to conceiving Islamophobia. While some contestation is ongoing, the direction of travel is captured by those such as [Klug \(2012\)](#), who argues that Islamophobia has 'come of age' and [Moosavi \(2014\)](#) who argues that it is pointless to continually contest whether islamophobia exists. Further evidence of this scholarly shift is evident in a growing number of studies including those by [Allen \(2010b\)](#), [Sheehi \(2011\)](#), [Lean \(2012\)](#), [Taras \(2012\)](#) and [Carr \(2016\)](#), each of whom develop thinking beyond the simple and literal in order to provide a more critical and informed analysis. An example of this can be found in the work of [Allen \(2010b\)](#) and [Sheehi \(2011\)](#), who both argue that Islamophobia functions as an ideology; one that is embedded in a vast array of individual, communal, social, and global patterns of thoughts and meanings that inform what is routinely accepted as being known and understood about Muslims and Islam. As such, it is akin to the macro forms of discriminatory phenomena referred to previously. [Allen \(2010b\)](#) describes these as the 'normative truths' of Islamophobia and can be best illustrated through considering manifestations of Islamophobia that involve threat or subjection to violence. Noting that [Githens-Mazer and Lambert \(2010\)](#) and [Moosavi \(2015\)](#) rightly stress that such manifestations are relatively rare, when such manifestations do occur, [Allen \(2010b\)](#) argues that it is likely the perpetrator will asymmetrically deploy the normative truths as a means through which to motivate, rationalise, or justify. In this respect, the macro (cause) can be seen to act as the catalyst



for the micro (effect): the normative truths thereby not only inform thinking, but more importantly, catalyse and subsequently rationalise the perpetration and subsequent manifested act of Islamophobia.

However, such understandings are somewhat removed from how Islamophobia tends to be understood in the political and public spaces, where it continues to be simplistically defined, vaguely conceived, and routinely contested. While some such as [Vakil \(2010\)](#) argues for a complete suspension of any engagement with Islamophobia, in doing so, he miscasts the issue. Despite Islamophobia continuing to be simplistically conceived and failing to be afforded any appropriate political recognition, it has nonetheless been established in the contemporary lexicon through having had considerable investment from both critics and advocates alike. While problematic, it is within this context that the Coalition government both understood and subsequently sought to address Islamophobia. From the outset, it must be stressed that the Coalition's approach had no clear definition or conception of Islamophobia upon which it was founded. At best, its understanding of Islamophobia was vague and lacking clarity. Consequently, a similar approach is adopted here, whereby no preference is shown towards any single definition. This necessarily prompts three points of clarification. First, Islamophobia in the context of this article is understood to be akin to other discriminatory phenomena for instance racism or homophobia. Second, it is extremely rare for discriminatory phenomena to be singularly or universally defined, and so Islamophobia is far from exceptional in this respect. Finally, while the focus here is on the political and policy, scholarly studies are employed where appropriate to frame and inform the thinking and arguments put forward.

### 3.2. Religious Discrimination, Islamophobia and New Labour

Prior to the CBMI's 1997 report, there was scant recognition of any form of religiously motivated discrimination in the British setting ([Allen 2013b](#)). While [McLoughlin \(2010\)](#) notes political recognition first emerged in the mid-1980s, [Cooper \(2004\)](#) is right to balance this by stressing how this recognition was largely confined to Britain's left-leaning urban conurbations. At the national level, recognition was first evident in the aftermath of the Satanic Verses affair in 1989 when a number of Muslim organisations began to call for legislation to make religious discrimination unlawful ([Weller 2006](#)). Supported by the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), the UK Action Committee on Islamic Affairs (UKACIA) was the first to propose specific interventions via its 1993 report, *Muslims and the Law in Multi-Faith Britain: the Need for Reform*. Citing Britain's 1975 White Paper on racial discrimination, UKACIA suggested it provide a suitable template for similar legislation to protect religious communities and individuals ([Allen 2013b](#)). While Islamophobia was still to be named, things changed in 1994 with the publication of a report by the [Runnymede Commission on Anti-Semitism \(1994\)](#). Setting out evidence to suggest that religiously-motivated hate was transforming, the report not only expressed concern about how Muslims and Islam were being increasingly targeted, but so too did they boldly decide to name it as Islamophobia.

Resultantly, the CBMI was established and its report was published in 1997 to coincide with the election of the New Labour government. As Weller put it, this "moved the terms of the debate quite significantly...(introducing) into public discourse the notion that, alongside shared dynamics of discriminatory experience, there may also be particularities of Muslim experience signalled by the word 'Islamophobia'" ([Weller 2006](#), p. 306). Calling for 'decisive action', the CBMI proposed 60 wide-reaching interventions. However, as [Allen \(2010b\)](#) notes, given the reluctance of New Labour to adopt many of the recommendations, so the decisive action called for failed to materialise. Nonetheless, New Labour was quick to acknowledge religion and markers of religiosity in terms of formal policy interventions. Quickly introducing the Human Rights Act 1998—formally establishing the right to freedom of religion or belief in the British constitution—New Labour also commissioned research into religious discrimination soon after. In the ensuing report, *Religious Discrimination in England and Wales* ([Weller et al. 2001](#)) it was shown that a majority of those Muslims engaged in the research felt that discrimination against them was on the rise. While so, the report was criticised for failing to name this particularistic manifestation of discrimination as Islamophobia ([Weller 2006](#)). Recommending that

existing race relations legislation be extended, further research was commissioned which explored the legal aspects of doing so (Hepple and Choudhary 2001). While acquiring suitable evidence, New Labour always appeared reluctant to recognise Islamophobia as a particularistic phenomenon. This was apparent in the wake of 9/11, when, despite a backlash against Muslims being evident (Allen and Nielsen 2002), it preferred not to attribute it with any specific name. It was somewhat anomalous then when John Denham, a New Labour minister at the time, spoke of Islamophobia being a cancer-like phenomenon (Allen 2013c).

In fact, New Labour rarely referred to Islamophobia during its 13 years of government from 1997 to 2010. Of the few times it did, some useful insights can be drawn about how other discourses about Muslims and Islam framed understanding. In 2010, the then Prime Minister Gordon Brown said during an interview with the *Muslim News* that if his party were to win the forthcoming general election, it was committed to doing more to address Islamophobia (Allen 2010b). While so, the interview was about the need to strengthen counter-terror legislation and so the offer to do more to address Islamophobia appeared to be little more than a mere ‘bargaining chip’ that sought to co-opt Muslims and their communities into endorsing and supporting policies that continued to unduly target them (Khan 2009; Kundnani 2015). In fact, many of New Labour’s political discourses about Muslims or Islam were unquestionably framed within policies relating to security, counter-terror, and Islamist extremism. The same was also true regarding political and policy interventions. So, when legislation was introduced to protect against assault or abuse on the basis of religion, it was included as part of the Anti-Terrorism, Crime & Security Act 2001. Across its 13 years of government, New Labour’s discourses routinely and repeatedly co-joined the discrimination faced by Muslims with counter-terror, security, and extremism. As numerous studies state, this was problematic in that it reinforced many of the public’s fears and anxieties about Muslims and Islam (Briggs et al. 2006; Spalek and McDonald 2009; Allen 2013c; Kundnani 2015). Consequently, it is possible that the ‘normative truths’ were somewhat more reinforced than refuted under New Labour.

However, it must be noted that New Labour did introduce formal equality-type interventions that extended existing protections against discrimination on the basis of ‘race’, ethnicity, gender, and disability to those relating to age, sexual orientation, and religion or belief. Incorporated within the Equality Act 2006, and further strengthened by the Equality Act 2010, Riddell and Watson argue that this brought about “radical change” (Riddell and Watson 2011, p. 191). In addition, the 2006 Act also necessitated the creation of the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), a public body required to promote and enforce equality and non-discrimination laws in England, Scotland and Wales. As with Weller’s research previously (Weller 2006), the EHRC was also criticised for failing to recognise a particularistic Islamophobia (Allen 2013c). In the ensuing years, little has changed, with Islamophobia continuing to receive scant attention (Woodhead 2010). An example of this can be seen in the EHRC’s reluctance to disaggregate cases of discrimination reported to it on the basis of religion or belief in the same way it does in relation to ‘race’ and ethnicity. Not only does this contribute towards a general lack of clarity about the true scale and prevalence of Islamophobia (Hargreaves 2014), but so too does it suggest that not all discriminatory phenomena have been similarly and equitably responded to in terms of the historical and contemporary British settings.

### 3.3. The Coalition’s Approaches to Addressing Islamophobia

If a particularistic Islamophobia was unacknowledged by New Labour, the same cannot be said of the Coalition government that followed. Soon after winning the 2010 general election and having declared itself to be a government that ‘did god’ (Watt 2010)—a statement that sought to deliberately demarcate it from New Labour’s ‘we don’t do god’ approach (Allen 2011c)—Warsi’s ‘dinner-table test’ speech was seen as a signal of intent. Stating that ordinary British people were increasingly comfortable saying things about Muslims and Islam they would feel uncomfortable saying about other religions and their communities, Warsi’s Islamophobia was undoubtedly particularistic. Targeting the middle classes via the ‘dinner-table’ reference, Warsi lambasted them for having historically been the

very same people for whom challenging racism and other forms of discrimination would have been the norm. For her, nowadays they were the ones normalising Islamophobia. Unsurprisingly, Warsi's speech was roundly criticized. Rod Liddle in the *Spectator* for example, described Warsi's speech as "the most intellectually muddled and facile speech I think I have ever read from a senior politician" (Liddle 2011). Maybe aggrieved that he was singled out by Warsi, Liddle reaffirmed why he believed that being Islamophobic was common-sense: "There are gradations of spite, violence, persecution and insecurity within Islam: but what there always is, beyond all doubt, is spite, violence, persecution and insecurity" (Liddle 2011).

Nonetheless, Warsi's prioritising of Islamophobia garnered immediate traction, prompting the Coalition to back the creation of the APPG on Islamophobia, while also establishing the Cross-Government Working Group on Anti-Muslim Hatred. This approach was not without precedent, as a similar approach had been successfully used by New Labour as regards Antisemitism a decade or so beforehand (Allen 2013c). The use of different descriptors for each offers an interesting insight into the ongoing contestation of Islamophobia in the political spaces, as also the Coalition's lack of clarity. From speaking to key political actors, the decision to use 'Anti-Muslim Hate', rather than 'Islamophobia' for the Working Group, was in response to a report by the Quilliam Foundation. A Muslim-led counter-extremism organisation, Quilliam claimed that Islamophobia had been exploited by 'Islamists and Wahhabis', and so if politicians used the term, it would hand a "propaganda coup" to the Islamists (Readings et al. 2011, p. 14). While lacking evidence to support such claims, it is interesting that political actors would openly state that Islamophobia was a term they could not endorse. By the end of the Coalition's five years in government, however, political actors were again using the term, thereby rendering Quilliam's unsubstantiated claims somewhat invalid. It is worth noting that scholarly evidence has never substantiated Quilliam's claims.

### 3.3.1. The APPG on Islamophobia

Despite being launched after the Coalition won the 2010 general election, it is likely the APPG would have been established whoever had won, as political support had been agreed at a closed parliamentary meeting in March the same year (Allen 2013c). As informal cross-party groups, APPGs have neither official status within Parliament, nor any formal endorsement from the government at the time (Parliament UK 2010). Consequently, the APPG's association with the Coalition was rather more consequential. Nonetheless, the Coalition supported the APPG and had one of its politicians—Conservative Member of Parliament (MP), Kris Hopkins—appointed as Chair. Launched in November 2010, the APPG's remit was to investigate the forms, manifestations, and extent of discrimination against Muslims in today's Britain; review the effectiveness of relevant legislation; review existing mechanisms for recording anti-Muslim hate crimes; and investigate the role of the media in fostering intolerance towards Muslims. Investigative, rather than implementative, it was necessary for a concurrent mechanism—namely the Working Group—to be established through which any ensuing recommendations could be duly considered and subsequently implemented.

Despite being described by as 'a momentous occasion' by Hopkins at the launch (Allen 2011a) the APPG was soon dogged by controversy. Having appointed iENGAGE—a London-based Muslim organisation sometimes that was also sometimes referred to as ENGAGE—as Secretariat, a number of the APPG's members resigned in protest including the Chair and Vice-Chair, Lord Janner of Braunstone (Gilligan 2011). These were prompted by allegations in the media that individuals associated to iENGAGE were known to be 'Islamist sympathisers'. From the subsequent investigation into the controversy commissioned by the APPG (Allen 2011a), the situation prompted the remaining members to argue that if iENGAGE did not resign, then it should be forced to do so, neither of which happened. Instead, what ensued was a highly polemical and damaging series of 'tit-for-tat' exchanges involving various individuals associated with iENGAGE and its critics in the media and online. Aside from the polemics, some questions about iENGAGE's suitability in terms of its expertise and capacity were justified. However, there is little doubt that these tangible concerns became subsumed in what became



an increasingly acrimonious and public ‘trial by blog’, damaging the credibility of the APPG, as well as the political agenda to address Islamophobia (Allen 2011a). Culminating in a vote by the APPG’s members, iENGAGE were eventually removed as Secretariat almost a year after the controversy began.

Subsequently relaunched in November 2011, the APPG once again mustered tentative cross-party support (Bright 2011). This, time however, there was very little apparent leadership or strategy. From discussions with two political actors involved in the APPG, both attribute this to the decision not to appoint an external Secretariat. Instead, Secretariat responsibilities were given to the private staff of the APPG Co-Chair, who at the time was Simon Hughes (former Deputy Leader of the Liberal-Democrats and MP for Bermondsey and Old Southwark). Why and who made this decision remains unclear and so requires further consideration. This includes questioning the extent to which the Co-Chairs felt that there were no suitable candidates for the Secretariat role. While so, it is unlikely that this would have been the case. At the closed Parliamentary meeting in March 2010, a broad coalition of partners came together to lobby for the APPG, including organisations such as the Runnymede Trust, representatives from academic institutions including the universities of Birmingham and Exeter, and various Muslim organisations that had greater reach, longer histories, and more appropriate expertise than iENGAGE. From documents seen, iENGAGE seem to have begun to lobby individual political actors sometime after the initial meeting, although the precise justification for this remains unknown. Nonetheless, as the March 2010 meeting illustrates, there were various options available to the Co-Chairs as regards those suitable for appointment as Secretariat.

Maybe other factors were at play, not least the problems that might have been attributed to ‘Muslim-ness’ or Muslim identity. As Allen (2010b) notes, there is a tendency for Islamophobia to be seen to be both the problem and preserve of Muslims. Might this have been why it was Warsi—a political actor at the time who identified as Muslim—who was required to publicly recognise the need to address Islamophobia? As Allen explains, while Islamophobia directly and discriminatorily targets Muslims for being ‘Muslim’, so too is Islamophobia routinely seen to be the fault of Muslims because of their actions, beliefs, and so on. This results in many suggesting that only Muslims can ‘solve’ the issue of Islamophobia, something that can be inappropriately and unhelpfully reduced to discourses that infer Muslims need to be ‘less Muslim’ (Allen 2010b). If so, then might the Co-Chairs have thought that only Muslims or a Muslim organisation for instance could have been appointed as Secretariat? Albeit speculative, if Muslim identities were seen to be inherently problematic, and therefore likely to attract similarly adverse levels of scrutiny and criticism as iENGAGE did previously, might this have been what one political actor candidly meant when suggesting that the decision not to appoint a Muslim organisation as Secretariat was the “safer option”?

Despite having categorically achieved little, the APPG was once more relaunched in May 2013 (Allen 2013b) and showed little sign of improving its leadership and strategy. Consequently, its activities became increasingly sporadic and lacking coherence. On reflection, it is difficult to find any evidence that the APPG ever overcame the initial obstacles it encountered with iENGAGE. This would seem to have been further compounded by the subsequent decision to appoint private secretaries as Secretariat who—like iENGAGE before them—neither had the expertise nor capacity demanded of them. This can be illustrated by a conversation with one of the private secretaries that were afforded Secretariat responsibilities. When asked why the APPG had failed to produce any briefings or minutes from its different meetings as per other APPGs, they explained that this was because the private secretaries had completely overlooked the need to record the oral evidence that had been presented during meetings, or collect the accompanying written evidence. The complete void of outputs from the APPG is therefore unsurprising, as there would appear to be no known records for many of its earliest hearings and activities.

### 3.3.2. The Cross-Government Working Group on Anti-Muslim Hate

The Working Group was launched in January 2012 and, as noted previously, was established to work collaboratively with the APPG. Comprising independent members that included representatives

of Muslim organisations and non-Muslim civil society organisations, alongside imams and academics, all were deemed to have been identified on the basis of their relevant expertise. Housed in the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), the Working Group also included representatives from all governmental departments, the Association of Chief Police Officers, and the private secretaries of individual politicians who held a particular interest in the matter being considered. While never being formally ratified, the terms of reference initially circulated stated that the Working Group would do the following: work with key partners and government departments to make recommendations for government and others to reduce Islamophobia; respond to local or international events; review trends in anti-Muslim sentiment and hatred; increase and improve the reporting and recording of Islamophobia; and report progress to Parliament (Working Group, unpublished). In contrast to the APPG, the Working Group appeared better structured and soon established a work programme that included various sub-groups that reflected individual expertise. Consequently, sub-groups were created that sought to focus on the media, data collection, and research evidence, among others. While each were active, as illustrated by the media sub-group quickly meeting with the Office of Communications (the UK's communications regulator, OFCOM), the Press Complaints Commission, and the Society of Editors, there was however a clear lack of strategic remit about what the sub-groups were seeking to achieve. Few of those active in the sub-groups were clear about what they were meant to be working towards, whether they should be gathering evidence, facilitating briefings, making recommendations, or something else.

The same was symptomatic of the Working Group more broadly. While some members saw it to be a mechanism through which the Coalition could be held to account over certain issues, this was contested by others. Consequently, the lack of any agreed terms of reference detrimentally impacted on both the Working Group's internal dynamics, as also its external activities. An example of this became evident when only three independent members deemed it appropriate to put their names to a letter to the then Education Minister, Michael Gove, that sought to criticise his response to the Operation Trojan Horse hoax allegations about an 'Islamist takeover' of Birmingham schools (Clarke 2014). It is worth noting that all allegations relating to a 'takeover' were subsequently refuted. Those who did sign the letter believed at the time that Gove should have been questioned about the allegations. Those who did not were somewhat more reluctant to explain why, with one suggesting that an 'arm's length' approach would be more beneficial to monitor developments. It is worth noting that despite the significance of the enquiries and fallout from the Operation Trojan Horse allegations, the Working Group made no comment whatsoever about it either publicly or privately. The issue of public versus private was another cause of disagreement among the Group's membership. While discussed at length, those members who advocated a public profile argued that doing so would help raise awareness of Islamophobia, attribute the Working Group with greater political influence, and offer a more informed and objective voice to the media, among others. The counter arguments can be captured in the comments of one member who stated that there was no good argument to convince them of "putting my head above the parapet". As they went on to explain, they did not want to become a target for criticism and so preferred to engage with politicians without it being publicly made available. Resultantly, the Working Group not only remained largely invisible inside government due to its reluctance to hold politicians to account, but so too outside of government due to a collective reluctance by members to be held publicly accountable by those they claimed to represent.

Questions also remain unanswered about how and by whom decisions were made in relation to the Working Group. An example of this can be seen in relation to the decision-making process about a piece of research requested by the Working Group. Culminating in submitting a formal research proposal to the DCLG in 2013, a number of the independent members identified the need to establish a comprehensive evidence base relating to Islamophobia in the contemporary British setting, in order to better understand its scale, prevalence, and character. Duly agreed by the DCLG, a decision was taken away from the Working Group meetings to commission an intern from the University of Warwick, with no known expertise or knowledge about Islamophobia or even Muslim communities to undertake

the research, in preference of those members who were academics and had appropriate expertise in the field. In spite of protests by a number of the members, the research went ahead and was duly completed and presented to the Working Group in May 2014. Despite unanimous agreement among the membership that the findings should be made publicly available in the form of a report, a further decision was made some weeks later and away from the Working Group to the contrary. To date, the research remains unpublished without any comment or explanation why.

The Working Group encountered other problems also, one of which can be illustrated by focusing on the need to review the evidence relating to the recording of Islamophobic incidents and attacks. Much of this depended on the data to be provided by the recently established Tell MAMA (an acronym for ‘measuring anti-Muslim attacks’). Funded by the Coalition, MAMA sought to provide a third-party reporting service for victims and witnesses of Islamophobia to record details and obtain further advice and support where appropriate. Similar to the service provided by the Community Safety Trust (CST) for victims of Antisemitism, the data collected was to be published annually, from which trends and developments could be identified and duly responded to (CST 2015). The CST has also used this data to lobby politicians, the police, and media, among others. Unlike the CST however, MAMA was publicly scrutinised and subsequently attacked shortly after its launch seemingly giving credence to Warsi’s observation that Muslims—including their organisations—are treated quite differently from those associated and affiliated with other religious communities. Indeed, one might question the underlying motivations given that those attacking MAMA were the same individuals that had previously attacked iENGAGE. Noting the APPG’s investigation, it observed that these same individuals had historically had an “uneasy relationship with some Muslims, their communities and organisations” (Allen 2011a, p. 42). Regarding the journalist Andrew Gilligan for instance, the report noted how he routinely used the term ‘Islamist’ as “others might use an insult. Branding an individual, organisation or institution an ‘Islamist’ or an ‘Islamist ally’ carries with it a slur on the recipient” (Allen 2011a, p. 44).

MAMA continued to attract criticism. Following the murder of the British serviceman Lee Rigby by two Islamists on the streets of London in May 2013, MAMA’s CEO—who was also one of the original independent members of the Working Group—released data to the media in support of claims he made that there had been a dramatic rise in Islamophobic incidents in the immediate aftermath of the killing. Reported widely, MAMA’s critics questioned the validity of the data and lodged a formal complaint with the Press Complaints Commission. Subsequently investigated, it ruled that MAMA had indeed exaggerated its claims (Gilligan 2014). While the investigation was ongoing, however, the Coalition announced that it was to cease funding to MAMA (Gilligan 2013). While outside the remit of the Working Group, the decision had ramifications nonetheless. Not only did this prompt a resignation from the Working Group, but so too was a decision made that MAMA’s data should no longer be used. Given that MAMA’s data has since been independently verified by the University of Teeside (Copsey et al. 2013; Feldman and Littler 2014), the decision would appear to have been somewhat premature, given the detrimental impact it had in working towards the better recording and monitoring of Islamophobia for which a sub-group had been established. It also prompts questions about the political influence certain external actors appear to be able to exert as regards Islamophobia, Muslims, and Islam.

In terms of interventions, one might consider the sub-group that worked towards establishing *Srebrenica Genocide Memorial Day*. While the first memorial day was held in 2013, the sub-group responsible for this was quite unlike the others in that it was largely driven by one member who appeared to have been working towards this prior to being appointed to the Working Group. Other ‘positive image’ interventions were also endorsed by the Working Group and included the *Big Iftar* (Department for Communities and Local Government 2014), which sought to invite non-Muslims to participate in the traditional meal which signals the end of the fast during the month of Ramadan and *We Remember Too* (We Remember Too 2013), which raised awareness about Muslims that fought as part of the Allied Forces during World War II. While neither intervention was a direct outcome of the Working Group’s activities, they were publicised as tangible ‘successes’ in later cross-governmental

communications (DCLG email, unpublished). While contestable, it is the nature of the interventions that can be seen to be most problematic particularly when considered through the lens of Hall's study of anti-racism (Hall 1979). For him, such interventions tended to be premised on the basis that the substitution of positive images or messages in preference of any negative equivalent would have a beneficial outcome in terms of tackling discrimination, bigotry, and hate. As Hall goes on to explain, however, because these interventions are overly simplistic and lack any intrinsic value, those who receive the positive images typically dismiss them as being phoney and patronising, seeing them as being rather more superficial than meaningful or real. The extent to which *Srebrenica Genocide Memorial Day*, the *Big Iftar*, and *We Remember Too* had any real or tangible impact in addressing Islamophobia must therefore be questioned. Given that these were the only outputs from the Working Group, so it must be concluded that along with the APPG, it too failed to 'get it' in terms of addressing Islamophobia.

### 3.4. Coalition Discourses About Muslims and Islam

As various studies have shown, political discourses can be utilised as conduits through which unwritten and unofficial policies and policy-thinking are aired, affirmed, reiterated, and reinforced (Fischer and Forester 1993; Becker et al. 2012). Given the marked shift in the Coalition's discourses about Muslims and Islam over its five years in government, so it might be necessary to consider the extent to which this had an impact in terms of addressing Islamophobia. As before, the Coalition's political discourses were initially overwhelmingly positive and acknowledged a particularistic Islamophobia. This changed in the government's latter years, to the extent that its discourses became indistinguishable from its New Labour predecessor. This can be illustrated by the Coalition's 2013 report into extremism (Extremism Task Force 2013) and has indeed been echoed in recent speeches by the Prime Minister Theresa May, who, in 2013, was Home Secretary and thus had responsibility for tackling extremism. Both then and now, while Islamophobia was specifically referred to as positioned within discourses about counter-terror and extremism: "extremism of all kinds, including the Islamophobia and neo-Nazism espoused by the murderer of Mohammed Saleem to justify his terrorist attacks against mosques in the West Midlands" (Extremism Task Force 2013, p. 1). The similarities between May and Brown's speeches are therefore striking. While the primary focus of their speeches was about the need for additional counter-terror legislation, both included statements about the need to incorporate formal interventions within that legislation to concurrently address Islamophobia. So, while May put forward that the Coalition would require the police to record Islamophobic hate crime in line with Antisemitism (McIntyre 2015), what became apparent was that in line with its New Labour predecessor, the Coalition's discourses appeared to increasingly conceive Islamophobia as a phenomenon that was rather more symptomatic and consequential of terrorism and extremism than the particularistic discrimination in previously had.

Further similarities between the Coalition and New Labour are also evident. Aside from terrorism and extremism, both government's discourses disproportionately focused on what Parekh (2006) refers to as the 'problems' attributed to Muslims and Islam. As regards the Coalition, this included: Jeremy Browne questioning whether the state should protect young Muslim women from having the veil 'imposed' on them in schools (Swinford 2013); Jeremy Hunt suggesting similar in the health sector and the right of patients to 'see the face' of clinical staff (Cooper 2013); and Michael Gove appointing Peter Clarke—the former head of Scotland Yard's counter-terrorism command—to investigate the Operation Trojan Horse allegations (Peachey 2014). It is interesting that the Chief Constable of West Midlands Police condemned the latter as a 'desperately unfortunate appointment', given the message it sent to Muslim communities (Pidd and Dodd 2014). Similar too with New Labour and the extensive list offered by Allen (2010b): John Reid's call for Muslim parents to look out for the 'tell-tale signs' of extremism; ministers at the Department of Education issuing guidelines to universities urging them to 'spy' on Muslim and 'Muslim-looking' students; Ruth Kelly announcing that Muslim organisations needed to do more to defend core British values; and Jack Straw's comments that the niqab was a barrier to integration. For both governments, Muslims and Islam were undeniably seen to be problematic.



As with New Labour, there was resonance between the discourses of the Coalition and some within the far-right milieu (Allen 2013a). A good illustration of this is Prime Minister David Cameron's 2011 speech in Munich. Declaring the end of British state multiculturalism, Cameron blamed its demise on the threat posed by Islamist extremism (New Statesman 2011). While Cameron was saying this, a rally was taking place in Luton to celebrate the second anniversary of the English Defence League (EDL), a far-right, counter-jihadi street movement (Allen 2011b). At the rally, the EDL's leaders delivered speeches that similarly focused on the perceived threat posed to Britain by Islamist extremism. In the media's reporting of the two speeches, not only did the latter gain publicity for resonating with that of the Prime Minister, but so too did it acquire legitimacy. Reiterating Allen, "the messages taken . . . categorically reinforced the idea that Muslims and Islam were something that was causing 'us' problems: a problem that was threatening 'our' culture, 'our' values, 'our' way of life" (Allen 2010a, p. 230). As was shown previously, such discourses not only reinforce pre-existing fears and anxieties about Muslims and Islam, but so too do they place Muslims and their communities under increased pressure, potentially increasing feelings of anger, alienation, and mistrust, while also giving credence to extremist ideologies (Briggs et al. 2006; Spalek and Lambert 2008; Khan 2009). If one revisits the notion of 'Islamophobia thinking', it could be argued that the Coalition's latter discourses about Muslims and Islam potentially gave credence to this via the perpetuation of what were previously referred to as normative truths.

#### 4. Analysis

Both commendable and promising, Warsi's speech was without doubt unprecedented. Creating exceedingly high expectations that the Coalition would be the first government in British political history to 'get it' as regards the need to address Islamophobia, quite the opposite was true, in that it comprehensively failed. Putting in place political mechanisms that were both resonant and replicating of the blueprint that had previously been successful in addressing Antisemitism, that same blueprint did not ensure the same successful outcomes regarding Islamophobia. In terms of formal interventions, it could be argued that the Coalition achieved less than its New Labour predecessor, a government that Allen (2013c) roundly criticised for its failure to adequately respond and subsequently address Islamophobia. In this respect, New Labour did at least introduce a number of formal interventions that had potential to indirectly address Islamophobia through extending the equalities framework to include protection against discrimination on the basis of religion or belief and the introduction of legislation that made incitement to religious hatred unlawful.

As regards informal interventions, some of the Working Group's independent members were confident that the likes of *Srebrenica Genocide Memorial Day*, the *Big Iftar*, and *We Remember Too* would have a positive impact as regards addressing Islamophobia. However, this remains open to debate as per the reservations expressed previously. At the micro level, the impact of these interventions is likely to have been negligible, not least because informal interventions have been shown to have the greatest impact in addressing discriminatory phenomena at the macro level (Bhavani et al. 2005). However, even at the macro, the impact of these interventions has to be questioned given the lack of reach each had. Factor in that they were also never formally endorsed by the Coalition government, or indeed either the APPG or Working Group, and that potential appears to be lessened even further, not least through lacking authority and credibility. To recall Hall (1979), it is also unknown the extent to which those who did engage and participate in the interventions saw them as being positive and authentic, or as he put it, phoney and patronising.

Having publicly prioritised the need to address Islamophobia, why then did the Coalition government fail? From monitoring and analysing the Coalition's approaches, three broad considerations would appear to be relevant in trying to explain this. The first might be described as being broadly political. Given the Coalition's early discourses, it would seem that the political will to address Islamophobia was evident early on. From participating in both the APPG and Working Group, however, a pertinent observation was that there were a few politicians that were keenly and publicly



supportive of doing so. For the APPG, the driving force was Simon Hughes, and to a lesser degree Jack Straw, who incidentally was not a member of the Coalition government. For the Working Group, the equivalent was Warsi. It must be noted, however, that almost all governmental departments were represented at the Working Group's meetings and so a cross-governmental awareness at least was known to be apparent. The question then is the whether this awareness was ever transformed into the necessary political leadership that Warsi stated was so desperately needed. Little evidence is available to suggest that it did.

To this extent, it is worth considering the Coalition's discourses and whether they reinforced ideological forms of 'Islamophobia thinking', rather than combatted Islamophobia per se. [Bhavani et al. \(2005\)](#) offers a useful illustration. Having monitored British political discourses about 'race' and racism, they noted that many political actors routinely deployed discourses that focused on the perceived 'problems of race' as a means of negating or deflecting attention from political discourses that were focusing on the need to address racism and its causes. Something similar might be evident in how the Coalition shifted its political discourse from needing to address Islamophobia to instead needing to address the 'problems' of Muslims and Islam. If so, then might it be necessary to question the authenticity of the Coalition's discourses and seeming commitment to addressing Islamophobia from the outset? Political theory relating to functionalism might offer an insight. In this respect, religion is reduced to the political function performed by the religion, its institutions, communities, and individual actors. Consequently, function is determined and managed within the political spaces by political actors and institutions and not by the religions, their institutions, communities, or individual actors. Resultantly, religion and the religious are not only negated, but so too become secondary to politics and the political. As such, was it possible that the discourses and political mechanisms put in place to address Islamophobia might have had an alternative function? Might that function have been one that sought to bring Muslims 'on-side' as a means of supporting the political process of addressing the 'problems' of Muslims and Islam that were seen to be rather more pressing and important to those within the political spaces? From participating in both formal and informal interventions, this was something that cannot be easily dismissed.

The second broad consideration centres on those co-opted to support the Coalition's approaches to addressing Islamophobia. While the blueprint for addressing Islamophobia was similar to that preferred to address Antisemitism, informal discussions with different Muslim actors highlight a number of significant factors that not only highlight the sharp differences between Britain's Jewish and Muslim communities, but why replicable approaches failed to be similarly successful. Regarding the differences between Jewish and Muslim communities, these are various and many. Among those identified as significant are that Muslims in Britain have a far shorter history, are greater in size, and have more complex intra-community diversity. Other important factors include the significantly different socio-economic statuses of each community, levels of educational attainment, indices of deprivation and poverty, sectarian and theological tensions, migration and settlement histories, and the impact of geopolitics among various others. Britain's Muslims and Jewish communities are therefore not in any way like-for-like. It is also worth noting that in the British legal system, Jewish communities have historically been recognised as a 'racial group' on the basis of their attributed mono-ethnicity. This has never been the case for Muslims who are undoubtedly multi-ethnic. Consequently, addressing Antisemitism necessarily begun from a quite different legal start-point aside from any mitigating socio-political or cultural differences. It is worth noting that Muslims have only been afforded protection on the basis of discrimination since the introduction of religion-specific legislation under New Labour ([Allen 2013c](#)).

However, maybe the most significant difference is in how Muslims have failed to effectively organise and represent themselves, an observation that can be illustrated by a meeting between the Antisemitism and Islamophobia Working Groups in 2013. Attending on behalf of the Antisemitism Working Group were three independent members, each of whom had specific expertise about the following aspects: Britain's Jewish communities, the British legal system, and Jewish theology.

In contrast, twelve independent members attended on behalf of the Islamophobia Working Group, for whom it would have been difficult to identify similar specific expertise. It could be argued therefore that the way in which British Muslims engage with government—process, identification, representation, and so on—is in itself problematic. In this respect, questions should be asked about how the Working Group was constructed—was membership determined by political actors, by expertise (as the original intimations suggested), or was it by certain Muslims be that in the form of organisations or individual actors? While unknown, it is maybe pertinent to reiterate that a number of the original Working Group members were affiliated to the Muslim Leadership Panel ([What Do They Know 2012](#)).

Observable differences relating to organisation and representation was evident in a comment made by one of the Antisemitism Working Group's independent members, who said that most important when engaging with politicians was the need for a unified front. As he explained, the Antisemitism Working Group never allowed personal, community, or theological differences to become something that politicians might seek to exploit. This was not observable among the Islamophobia Working Group. On the contrary, some independent members routinely criticised other well-known Muslim organisations, certain 'types' of Muslim (for instance, Salafis), and various individual Muslims. Such first-hand observations therefore run counter to Jones et al.'s study which claims that politically engaged British Muslims neither want to 'compete' against each other, nor appear to be 'self-appointed' ([Jones et al. 2014](#)). This was not the case with regards those co-opted to the Working Group, as evidenced by the disproportionate number of independent members affiliated to the Muslim Leadership Panel and the significant claims they make about representation made in a letter to Eric Pickles ([What Do They Know 2012](#)), the ministerial lead for the DCLG where the Working Group was housed. On the contrary, some of those co-opted appeared quite happy to both openly 'compete' and put themselves forward as 'self-representatives'. Interestingly, there were also a number of observable incidents when independent members who identified as Muslim seemed to internalise the perceived 'problems' of Muslims and Islam. An example of note included an independent member, who identified as Muslim, arguing that it was more pressing to address the widespread homophobia and sexism he claimed was endemic within Britain's Muslims communities than it was Islamophobia.

The final consideration relates to the influence of external actors, in particular the handful of journalists and media commentators referred to previously. While the focus on them here has been necessarily brief, it is suggested that a more detailed investigation which analyses their respective articles and comment pieces might would be extremely valuable. This would be especially given the undue influence they have as regards shaping and determining various decisions and functions relating to the political mechanisms and processes, but also the views about certain Muslim organisations and individuals. In this respect, an observation made in the APPG's investigation into the Secretariat furore appears relevant:

"questions (need) to be asked about some of the issues they pursue, some of the criticisms they posit, some of the language and terminologies they employ also ... it is also right to highlight and consider the use and attribution of value-loaded terminologies and language, to ask whether the criticisms and accusations that were made within such value-loaded frames were employed deliberately to bring down iENGAGE, the APPG or both" ([Allen 2011a](#), p. 47).

This final point is especially important. While it might be argued that as an investigative journalist, Andrew Gilligan for example is right to focus on 'Muslim' issues, organisations, and actors, it cannot be overlooked that he does so at the same time as routinely and repeatedly deploying terminologies and descriptors that function as slurs and insults ([Allen 2011a](#)). Given this is clearly evident, why does he continue to have such an unwieldy influence? Maybe the premise for any further investigation might be Warsi's observation that Muslims and Islam are spoken about and referred to somewhat differently from other religions and their respective communities.

## 5. Conclusions

When the Coalition government came to power in May 2010, it did appear to be a government that had indeed ‘got it’ regarding the need to address Islamophobia. Hindsight, however, suggests something quite different, no more seemingly ‘getting it’ than any previous government. In this respect, the Coalition failed in much the same way that its predecessors had. While so, there would appear to be no single factor that was wholly causal or verifiable in trying to explain this categorical failure. Therefore, one might be right to speculate as to the extent to which there was ever any true intent about the need to address Islamophobia. Admittedly, the Coalition did adopt a markedly different public approach to its predecessor; its assertive and confident pronouncements seeming to establish a significant shift. In hindsight, one might rightly question the extent to which the latter was any more genuine or committal than the reticence shown by Blair and Brown previously. Maybe one need question why, in spite of quite different public statements, both the New Labour and Coalition governments categorically failed? Could it have been that both envisaged the ‘problems’ attributed to Muslims and Islam as being more pressing, and therefore more important, in terms of requiring a political and policy response? Maybe both governments viewed extremism and terror to be of greater import than Islamophobia in terms of its wider societal impact? Maybe both were somewhat more cynical and merely saw making timely statements about Islamophobia as a means by which to co-opt and bring ‘on side’ Muslims and their communities. The evidence available here offers little beyond mere speculation and so it is recommended that a more systematic comparative analysis of the political discourses of both the Coalition and New Labour governments about the Muslim ‘Other’ and the ‘problems’ attributed to them be undertaken.

From critically reflecting on the Coalition government more specifically, what emerges is a complex and contested picture—one that appears to be somewhat confused at times not least because of the many unknowns that continue to exist. The ‘momentous occasion’ spoken about at the APPG’s 2011 launch now appears as overblown, as the opportunity to address Islamophobia appears to have been lost. With the changes in government since 2015—from a Conservative-led Coalition to a Conservative-majority government in 2015, to a much weakened Conservative-led Coalition government supported by the Democratic Unionist Party in 2017—one can only speculate on whether addressing Islamophobia will remain a priority. If it does, then the terror attack on the Finsbury Park mosque in June 2017 may afford some insight as to what form it might take. Focusing on the government’s immediate response, Theresa May—now in her role as Prime Minister—declared that it was the intention of her government to address the evil that is Islamophobia. In line with her earlier comments as Home Secretary, however, she once again referred to Islamophobia as a ‘form of extremism’; once again making the link between the discriminatory phenomenon and the policy agenda relating to security, counter-terrorism, and extremism. Without a doubt, this does not look like the political leadership Warsi said was necessary in her now infamous ‘dinner table test’. Instead, it looks like May’s government still does not ‘get it’, thereby meaning that it is highly unlikely that Islamophobia will be suitably and appropriately addressed in the foreseeable future at least.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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